

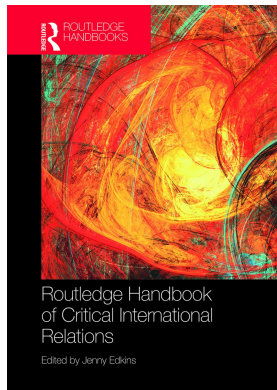
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10

CRITICAL WAR STUDIES

*Shane Brighton***Introduction**

Many who teach, research and study within International Relations know it as an academic field – even *the* field – for which war is a definitive problem. As a discipline, it has long identified its origins within the university system as a response to the cataclysm of the First World War. Thereafter, war and peace have been recurrent issues for core theoretical debates, the subject of multiple research programmes and a key policy sphere with which International Relations scholars have sought to engage. In this at least, Critical War Studies’ emphasis on ‘war-centred’ scholarship does something quite conservative, apparently affirming the core problematic of academic International Relations. It does so however, through attending to literatures and intellectual programmes significantly outside International Relations’ traditional, Anglo-American core, scepticism about many of the presuppositions and findings of conventional research on war and indeed, questioning the limits within which – whatever its view of itself – the discipline knows about war at all.

This chapter outlines Critical War Studies from the perspective of one of the researchers who formulated that phrase. Drawing on earlier and current work, it lays out a way of thinking about war: a set of conceptual and analytical orientations that take the transformative, disordering powers of war seriously. While some formulations may be novel, Critical War Studies draws upon a long-standing, diverse set of traditions concerned with reflection on war and its place in human life. In part, its ambition is to synthesise and present these in new ways as a counter-canon for war-centred scholarship. Nonetheless, the general focus of the sections below is on approaching knowledge about war as a site of politics rather than surveying those scholarly resources inside and outside International Relations on which this approach draws. The opening sections outline some key points of departure from disciplinary International Relations and security studies. In doing so, they reflect on the international political conjunctures in which Critical War Studies took form. The second half discusses two core concepts: the first being that, in addition to its obvious destructiveness, war should be understood as a ‘generative’ phenomenon. The second, ‘war/truth’, attempts to provide a critical, analytical frame for thinking about that which is generated. The chapter ends with some brief, forward-looking observations about critique, war and intersectionality.

War decentred: the obscure object of International Relations

The imperative towards a 'war-centred' approach derives from a set of critical observations about traditional International Relations scholarship. Despite many important insights, the defining schools of International Relations theory consistently 'decentre' war through explaining it as an outcome of more fundamental processes and relations (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011). War, first, is something to be explained through a totalising account of that which 'causes' it; for example, competition and failed power balancing under conditions of anarchy, or absence of free trade and democratic governance, imperial competition and the contradictions of capitalism and so on. As a study of 'order', international theory has thus tended to present war as historical interregnum between and a departure from sets of relations that can be properly described. One symptomatic outcome is a tendency for International Relations textbooks and curricula – even the best – to use war as a kind of periodising device. The Second World War, for example, frequently appears as a thinly attended-to interruption between International Relations during the preceding 'Twenty Years Crisis' and what emerges after 1945. In obvious and important ways, of course, international order after 1945 *was* distinct from the interwar period. But serious consideration of how, exactly, war functions as a transformative, productive phenomenon for that distinction is rarely considered. When war is included moreover, this is often in the form of specialised chapters looking at the historical transformation of war as a discrete phenomenon.¹ The basic insight that war *is* transformation and not just its consequence, the question of what might be understood about it as such, the conceptual and analytical challenge of theorising it in this way, are lost or – as issues of secondary interest – underdeveloped.

The logics of instrumentalism

A second cause of decentring is a tendency to presuppose the instrumentality of war – that is, its utilisation for a given purpose – as the most important aspect for understanding it. Even schools of thought traditionally counterposed, such as liberalism and realism, share a core assumption that war is above all an instrumental means by which elite ends and interests are pursued. This is particularly apparent in realism, which frequently provides students' first encounter with the systematic study of war and in various forms dominates war-oriented sub-disciplines such as security and strategic studies. Here an oft-cited and concise formulation of wars' instrumental nature is offered by Carl von Clausewitz, the 19th-century Prussian officer and philosopher of war. Clausewitz's famous dictum – at least as translated in the standard English edition of *On War* – suggests that war is the 'continuation of policy by other means' (1976: 83). Thereby, it is apparently affirmed as the instrument of princes described by 'classical realists' such as Machiavelli and Hobbes. The elevation of this particular statement by Clausewitz however, alongside the tendency to reduce 'politics' to 'policy' arguably marginalises his wider, more nuanced account of what war is and the wider social and political dynamics that shape it, indicating a tendency to retrospectively discipline war studies into servicing the needs of elites.

To be sure, interpreting war as an instrumental means through which power is contested, distributed and organised is important. Nor is it a sole preserve of realism, since threatening war to control its use by others is key to concepts of collective security on which various schools of liberal internationalism rest. The Democratic Peace Thesis, another key aspect of liberal thought on war, entirely presupposes – seeks to 'measure' – a causal relation between war and relations between regime types (Doyle, 1997: 258–299; Barkawi and Laffey, 2001: 1–25). Again, war is explained as a consequence of more fundamental, analytically prior, causes or as a phenomenon

whose relevant aspects are determined by those for whom it is an instrument or problem of policy. In each case, it appears as an important adjunct to more fundamental concerns.

Such observations do not in themselves licence rejection of ‘mainstream’ scholarship, the insights of strategic and security studies or the need for policy-relevant knowledge. The purpose rather is, first, their appropriation as instances of war presenting itself as a knowledge problem and, second, critical analysis of the limits to understanding they introduce. An initial sense in which Critical War Studies is ‘critical’ then, is this insistent focus on the relations between such limits, the conduct of war and its wider – public – meaning. These connections will be returned to. For now, several points follow. This section has suggested that there is utility and insight in understanding war as a means with which to pursue the ends of policy. But this utility cannot justify a totalising presupposition that war *is* a means for the pursuit of the ends of policy, or that studying it as such is adequate. As a discipline, International Relations has tended to a paradoxical condition in which war is declared a defining problem while, for the most part, being decentred by discussion of its ‘causes’ or the need to produce policy-relevant knowledges. The consequence is a frequently unreflective and theoretically limited field of the sort that might follow, for example, from the reduction of sociology to the study of social policy or fine art to museum management. Both social policy and museum management are essential, but – as practitioners within them would be the first to admit – wholly inadequate as conceptual frames for the wider phenomena to which, respectively, they refer. A foundational question emerges then, about how and for whom the instrumentalisation of war is asserted and the alternative knowledges and experiences it subordinates.

‘Securing’ war: the critical conjuncture

This sketch of International Relations is necessarily reductive, ignoring the discipline’s post-positivist turn and the expansion in critical research agendas that accompanied it: a transformation enriched and accelerated by the end of the Cold War, the ‘New Wars’ that followed and – for many – a prevailing sense of disciplinary failure to satisfactorily predict or explain both. The early iterations of Critical War Studies thus emerged from a period of war-generated crisis and intellectual pluralisation. Most importantly, however, the post-Cold War decade was a period in which the nature and meaning of war were dramatically reframed.

For many policy makers in Western governments and international organisations the USSR’s collapse marked an unprecedented historical break. The ‘New World Order’ would be marked by universal recognition of liberal internationalism as a necessary end-state. As a correlate, the ‘international community’ was largely assumed itself to have developed beyond war as an existential contest in which combatants might fight not just for survival or advantage, but over alternative, ideologically meaningful paths to political self-determination. Only one such path, one developmental direction and one destination remained: the harmonious peace of Western liberal modernity. The Cold War, after all, had consistently turned ‘hot’ in places where developmental models were contested; these being integral not only to the competing ideological frameworks of East and West but, more importantly, the geopolitical practices through which they competed for influence in the global South. In short if, as the influential conservative philosopher Francis Fukayama had argued (1992), history had ‘ended’ in 1989, and war was an engine of historical change, then war in the historical sense had finished.

Freed from Cold War competition, Western military power was restructured and reconceived not so much as a means for war, but rather ‘intervention’ to manage the violent, life-threatening consequences of Others’ under-development (Duffield, 2001;

Dillon and Reid, 2009). This interventionary imaginary produced two particularly important consequences for knowledge about war and the manner of its conduct. The first was a distinct, purportedly objective relation to war as a knowledge problem. Now above all a relation between non-Western Others, wars could be comprehensively categorised and understood as versions of conflict dynamics – nationalism, ethnicity and other particularisms – the West had already experienced historically, but transcended. Some analysts of conflict and the new global order made this teleology explicit, analysing combatants against a purportedly single developmental scale as ‘pre-modern’ or ‘neo-medieval’ (Cooper, 1996; Rennger, 2000). Alternatively, conflicts could be understood as expressions of degenerate, essentially criminal or sub-political motives of greed or grievance (Keen, 2000). Participants in ‘New Wars’ therefore, were not involved in the application of force to pursue political ends in the Clausewitzian sense. Supposedly ‘post-Clausewitzian’ combatants – ‘Warlords’ – in the Balkans, the Horn of Africa and elsewhere did not challenge the late modern condition of global liberal democracy, but rather sought to create spaces of exception from which they could extract wealth (Kaldor, 2007; cf.: Reno, 1999; Duffield, 2001; Hirst, 2001).

Securing the meaning of war permitted a developmental differentiation of societies and the forms of organised violence to which they found themselves subject: in effect, the differentiation of a zone of war in which the post-historical West could militarily ‘intervene’. The West itself by extension, existed as a universal end-state which only very exceptionally would require military defence. Rather, the necessity was to *secure* the West and manage ‘risks’ to the extraordinary range of human goods associated with it (Gow, 2004; Duffield, 2007; Gregory, 2010). The second dynamic introduced by the re-imagination of war in interventionary terms, then, was a widespread disposition amongst policy makers and academics – critical and otherwise – toward analysing armed conflict as one ‘threat to security’ amongst others (Booth, 1997; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Correspondingly, the very real intellectual flourishing of academic International Relations centred not on a revived war studies, but the expansion of security studies toward engagement with a ‘wider security agenda’. This again decentred war or, as one of the founders of Critical Security Studies was to describe it, the ‘merely military’, for the sake of security as an apparently more fundamental analytical category (Booth, 1997; Barkawi, 2011; cf.: Aradau, 2012).

Beyond the core problematic of critiquing instrumentalised understandings of war therefore, the post-Cold War decade foregrounded questions about how the idea of war itself could be transformed instrumentally in the service of wider projects of global ordering. The developmental assumptions about the privilege and capability of Western armed force, about the wars amongst the West’s others, prompted a turn toward postcolonial literatures. Frequently weak on analysing war itself (Barkawi, 2013), these at least provided a frame for thinking critically about the place of war and military affairs in the production of knowledge about the Global South and the West’s historic uses of ‘interventionary’ violence (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Porter, 2009; Barkawi, 2016). The growing body of poststructuralist IR theory, moreover, foregrounded the circulation of Western political discourse regarding nationhood, territory and identity and its outcomes for the organisation and use of force (Campbell, 1992, 1998; Dillon and Reid, 1996). In ways returned to later in this chapter, the spatial logics and epistemic certainties of this order were violently disrupted by the attacks of 9/11 and the, in Derek Gregory’s phrase, ‘everywhere war’ that followed (Gregory, 2011). Above all, the ‘Othering’ and displacement of war as an existential struggle became unsustainable – rightly or wrongly – within Western public discourse in ways that were to both intensify and further hybridise the wider security agenda with military means. Now when, within Western imagination, war had become historically transcended, exteriorised into ‘ungoverned

spaces' elsewhere, made knowable and subject to global governance, it returned to violently re-work the Western politics of social cohesion, identity and citizenship, public space, economic 'resilience' and more.

The worlds war makes: generative ontology and war/truth

Important as it is to historically situate Critical War Studies, as a scholarly project it has always aspired to a more general analysis of past, present and future war and the work of thinking about its place within human affairs. This section summarises some of the central ideas by which, in current thinking at least, this might be achieved. The first is the assertion that war is importantly understood as 'generative' in character and a set of closely associated claims about the centrality of 'fighting'. The second concept leads on from this and seeks to provide an account of what, most importantly, is generated: namely, a complex constellation of discourse and practice described as 'war/truth'. In presenting these, I seek to show how they function as a critical engagement with some of the prevailing ideas in post-Cold War debate while equally providing a more general frame for thinking.

Generative war and critical thought: fighting, meaning and excess

The idea that war is a generative force in human affairs is very old (Brighton, 2013). A certain version of it, moreover, is a commonplace in international theory in the sense associated with Charles Tilly's observation that: 'war made the state, and the state made war' (Tilly, 1975: 42). It is worth attending to both parts of this statement. The first can be taken to refer most significantly to the 'military revolution' in Early Modern Europe, the history and sociology of which forms one of the most substantial scholarly literatures in war studies. Here, a loose consensus exists that historical processes of military competition, enhanced by the introduction of gunpowder to the European battlefield, significantly escalated the governmental and economic demands on war-waging powers (Parker, 1998; Hirst, 2001: ch. 1–2; Malešević, 2010: ch 3–4). Developments in battlefield technologies such as mobile field artillery and reliable, easily produced firearms significantly increased casualties and, correspondingly, pressure to raise, organise and fund larger standing armies. These in turn generated new techniques of taxation and fiscal governance as well the centralised, state-led organisation of militarily significant spheres of knowledge and practice such as education, medicine, engineering and town planning (Malešević, 2010: 115). The cumulative outcome was that, because of its superiority as a war-fighting unit, the nation-state surpassed a multitude of other socio-political forms – dukedoms, principalities, guilds, leagues and so on – as the principle unit for governance (Hirst, 2001). At the same time, the necessity and capacity of war-waging powers to strategise the production and organisation of relevant knowledges was the site of an intimately related, war-driven transformation.

Tellingly, this generative history of war is bracketed off within academic International Relations to reify the second half of Tilly's formulation – the system of war-waging states – as its field of study. War thereafter is no longer productive of the state but, as an instrument of policy, presupposed as one of its capacities. Attention to the generative function of war has largely remained the concern of a sophisticated but relatively peripheral group of neo-Weberian sociologists and social theorists who continue to emphasise its productive role in state and society (Mann, 1986; Hirst, 2001; Joas, 2003). It is an idea, moreover, that many associate with various forms of reactionary, 'vitalist' militarism and an aestheticised vision of violence itself as somehow 'creative' (Arendt, 1970, 1998; Swift, 2013; Bartelson, 2016). That

the generative dynamics of war have been subject to ideological appropriation however, neither disproves their existence nor removes the need to make them objects of critical scholarship. Foregrounding the generative dimensions of war neither ignores nor trivialises its violence and destruction. It does however, open the way for analysis of what is generated, how it is generated and the relation of this to past, present and future violence. Beyond descriptive fidelity to war as phenomenon moreover, the generative view indicates a radical democratic commitment. The overwhelming majority of people reading this chapter, studying International Relations at university or conducting research will never make the decision to send a nation to war. They will never use war as an instrument. All of us however, in varying and complex ways, are subjects of war-generated, transformative, discourses, events and processes. All of us live with the legacies and demands imposed by decisions about military necessity. Quite aside from that which war-waging powers intend to generate, the critical sense of generative war is intended to open these myriad, every day, lifeworld consequences to scrutiny. Critical War Studies, therefore, exposes the tensions between instrumental objectives and what Clausewitz called 'the comet's tail': wars' cumulative, unasked-for and frequently unforeseen product.

At issue, then, is less the question of whether war is destructive *or* generative than what might be said of the relations that exist between these aspects. This takes us to the ontology of war: what and how, in the most enduring sense, war *is*. An initial phenomenology of the sort developed by Clausewitz, but reflecting most common understandings of the term, centres on 'fighting': relations of organised, purposive armed violence between socio-political groups and the forms of mobilisation and organisation needed to support them. No account of war can ignore fighting: the question is that of its relation to wider, frequently diffuse social and political consequences.

While Clausewitz had mainly set-piece land battles in mind, the term 'fighting' can equally be extended to the dispersed, protracted violence of (counter)insurgency and (counter)terrorism. What defines it is less duration, intensity or specific types of combatants than the *reciprocal, adaptive* dynamic produced by their efforts to improvise, deceive and counter each other. The ideal objective is a clear, decisive outcome. Such outcomes are not always straightforward however, since the clarity of victory and the terms of a decision admit contestation and disparity of perspective. A paradox of strategic thought, then, is that it pursues victory as an objective condition while subjectively imagining what would constitute victory and defeat for both parties. (Consider for example, the disconnect between US assumptions about the finality of their 2003 military victory in Iraq and the reality of the insurgency it created.) Strategic thought, therefore, seeks to impose conceptual clarity on the activity and consequences of fighting, while fighting itself produces a field of divergent experience, often obscure events and consequences that must be interpreted and given meaning at the time and subsequently (Keegan, 2004). War is generative in the sense that the outcomes of fighting always exceed its intent.

The importance of this excess becomes more evident when we consider another definitive aspect of fighting: killing and material destruction. In strategic idiom, the object is always to reduce these to actionable metrics of advantage and disadvantage, victory and defeat. Consider for example, the sense-making role of the 'body count' in Vietnam or more generally, military formations and equipment destroyed (or not) in battle. The technological and human means of waging war however, are inextricable from a far wider world of social meaning than strategic metrics express. Even when presented as data to a public largely willing to accept them as such, the bodies of dead Vietnamese registered as martyrs to many of their countrymen and evidence of horrific folly to the US anti-war

movement. They form part of the continued, contested legacy of a war whose consequences extend way beyond its formal duration and subsequent US defence policy. In complex and uneven ways, even the most abject and least-mourned objects of wars' destruction can impose a demand for sense-making, for generation of new forms of interpretation, understanding and legitimisation. In this way, the outcomes of war go way beyond the site of fighting. The most conventional, set piece engagements employ material and human means derivative from and consequential for a wider, non-military world of meaning. War may make dead bodies but, in this way, it also plays a profound role in making live bodies live the lives they do.

War/truth: power, knowledge and truth economies

Accepting the broad argument about the generative powers of war requires us to recognise that little in human life goes unaffected by it. Consequently, in ways that are challenging, enabling and problematic, the potential field of phenomenon to which Critical War Studies attends is extraordinarily broad. The research and scholarly communities that might be engaged become dramatically wider, as do the range of marginalised or excluded constituencies, experiences and perspectives that can be introduced. The danger exists, however, for research to become an excessively descriptive activity in which war-generated aspects of politics and society are traced *ad nauseam*, without purpose beyond the necessity to 'add in' information. An imperative for critical research though, is to go beyond merely introducing marginalised experiences and perspectives and provide a fuller account of why and with which ongoing consequences they are excluded. To address these questions Critical War Studies introduces a new conceptual and analytical framework: 'war/truth' (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011; Brighton, 2013).

Deriving from Foucault's power/knowledge schema, the war/truth concept is intended to foreground and clarify the powerful constitutive circuits that exist between war making, politics and society. It provides a means to trace the generation, circulation and effects of the knowledges and truth claims that shape, privilege or exclude understandings of war, dispose us toward violent conflict in future and have consequences for how war is conducted.

A logical starting point for war/truth research is the forms of discourse produced by war-waging powers: a category which includes state governments, but not exclusively. In a juridical sense, of course, states are presumed to be significantly defined by their monopoly on legitimate resort to war and internal use of force. The power/knowledge framework, however, orients us away from formal, juridical claims and the will and reason of sovereigns as adequate to the analysis of power. Among Foucault's insights, importantly, was the idea that exercising power in any given society requires an 'economy' of the 'discourse of truth' (1980: 93). The term 'economy' is important, indicating how power functions not only – or even most importantly – through suppressing contradictory truth claims or systems of knowledge, but rather through participation in the broader, society-wide frameworks by which the relative value of claims are determined. Most governments, for example, cannot control the extraordinary range of narratives, images and other information about war that emerge from media coverage, NGO monitoring, lobby groups, popular history, military memoirs, cinema and TV depictions and so on. To successfully retain war-waging powers, however, they are required to present their own knowledges and forms of understanding as authoritative. War/truth analysis, therefore, foregrounds the production of public truth about past, present and future war. It does so, however, with the assumption that war-waging powers are required to participate successfully within a heterogeneous field that is never entirely theirs to control, responding to and managing knowledge about war as well as producing it.

This is perhaps at its most obvious in the management of public perception during conflict. Returning to Vietnam, for example, in the final years of the war the US government recognised itself to be strategically limited not only because of enemy action, but just as importantly by public mistrust of its official narrative about that action and – whatever the body count might suggest – their capacity to defeat it (Gartner and Myers, 1995). This vulnerability is not limited to states. Intercepted in 2005, a well-publicised communique between the then deputy leader of al-Qaeda and the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq was primarily concerned with the need improve perceptions of violent insurgency within Sunni populations across the Middle East (Al-Zawahiri, 2005). The importance of truth work is further affirmed by the extensive investment in media and communication by jihadi groups seeking to answer their critics and assert a war-determined account of religion, politics and identity.

Sustaining an authoritative relation to war-waging power requires a multitude of diverse truth work, of which not all are fully public. Indeed, the credibility of defence and war preparation may rest in part in successful management of public perceptions about hidden knowledges. Consider, for example, the UK and US invocation of subsequently discredited intelligence sources in making the case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Amongst other activities, a public dossier supporting the case for invasion and invoking secret intelligence was released by the UK government and later found to largely comprise material plagiarised from a graduate researcher's dissertation, key terms of which had been altered to suggest a higher level of threat (Al-Marashi, 2006). This was consistent with US and UK leaders' expressions of certainty about the case for invasion. The subsequent UK public enquiry, however, concluded that intelligence had been selectively presented and did not support this case as it had been communicated (UK House of Commons, 2016: 115–116). Public invocation of intelligence in this way reflects a general belief that it provides a more authoritative form of knowledge than that offered by academics, journalists and other non-governmental analysts even when – as with the 'dodgy dossier' – governments may borrow liberally from such sources. Beyond intimating the power of secret knowledges, war-waging powers may suggest a superior position regarding a multitude of other, militarily relevant expertise. This may extend from new technologies to the psychology of personnel selection, trauma treatment, cultural understanding of foreign populations and overseas economic development. In part, then, war/truth manifests as a complex governance of knowledge in which the technical-strategic imperatives of military competitiveness intersect with knowledge production as such, as well as the public meaning of past, present and future war. War-waging powers then, are not only knowledge producers but extraordinarily powerful agents in consuming, organising, privileging and resourcing the intellectual labour of others. As James Der Derian has argued, these knowledges extend beyond the narrowly technical to include, with varying success, innovation in media and entertainment (Der Derian, 2008). This not only indicates that systems of representation be understood for enhancing battlefield effects and managing their public consumption, but a far broader circuit between war and culture production with which governments are required to engage.

The extraordinary range of war/truth dynamics can only be intimated here. This section has suggested the importance of an authoritative relation to war that goes beyond the juridical sense of 'legitimate authority'. Instead, war-waging powers are required to successfully negotiate war/truth economies: producing effective knowledges and maintaining public trust in them. This requires an incessant assaying of knowledge production as such. States are powerful consumers of knowledge, thereby resourcing and privileging its production according to their perceptions of need. The dynamism of war/truth consists not only in the continual transformation of knowledge, however, but in the ceaseless power of war itself to undermine and destroy certainties. In this sense, the fate of governments is wagered in part on

the veracity of knowledge claims and the capacity to sustain public belief in their competence. War itself therefore, through the contingency and unpredictability of fighting, has the power to transform truth economies. In doing so, it may violently re-order systems of knowing, being and doing, thereby producing new problematics.

Generating societies: identity, memory and narrative power

That war is unpredictable, dynamic and relational might appear obvious. Consider though, the extraordinary amount of war-related behaviour interpreted through essentialised accounts of combatants' identity – that is, as expressions of a pre-existent, deterministic culture, ideology, civilisation, religion, nationality and so on – even when making such assumptions is a source of military disadvantage (Porter, 2009). From this perspective, fighting should be considered inseparable from the work of interpreting and imagining Self, Others and the field of relations between them. Sameness and difference are both presupposed in mobilisation and, in the public meanings later attributed to victory and defeat, reinscribed in new forms: for example, framing defeat in ways that suggest its causes have been transcended, or justifying the costs of victory. Consequently, war tends to divide its historic meaning amongst those involved. To the extent to which this is politically problematic, such divisions may themselves prove generative as powers seek new, shared institutions and understandings. The European ideal after 1945, for example, required transcendence of markedly different national experiences. To succeed, an account of causes and justifications had to be generated with sufficient traction to legitimate new, binding transnational institutions and for some of its adherents, a supranational identity. (A process accelerated by growing acceptance of a new, common enemy to the East and potentially 'within', as well as the military-economic benefits of a North Atlantic military alliance.) An older vision of civilised Europe was reinvented thereby, founding new institutions and transcending violence of historically unprecedented scale with remarkable success.

The meanings of fighting therefore, must be generated for both war and peace to be waged. As such, they provide an enduring, potent framework for the constituting group identities. The periodising device of wartime provides a basic grammar for a multitude of collective narratives, whether national or – as appears increasingly the case – cultural and civilisational (Hanson, 2002; Dudziak, 2012). Few national symbols and narratives lack reference to military encounters, as a tour of the monuments and statues at the centre of most European capitals will confirm. In the wider world shaped by European empire and its legacies, post-colonial elites have generated and contested European-style national ideas through reference to violent struggle against imperial domination in various forms (Guha, 1988). Countries such as Germany, where experiences of total defeat make public memorialisation less common, may be differently but no less profoundly marked by communal legacies of war and the search for their meaning. Divided and divisive legacies moreover, may generate incommensurable claims and perceptions within, as well as between, polities. Here as elsewhere the constitutive tension between the military past and war/truth is importantly evident. The spatial-political partition of Ireland in 1921, for example, ended the War of Independence, founded an independent polity but almost immediately generated the societal schism of the Civil War and an enduring insurgency. Elsewhere, wartime conflict between fascists and communists shaped political violence decades after Axis defeat. In post-1945 France, a new national history of resistance provided a means to reconstruct national identity and diminish defeat and collaboration.

Beyond asserting technical-strategic competence therefore, war-waging powers are required to situate themselves and their actions within a societal 'war-story': whether these emphasise

virtuous consistency or radical disconnect from historical experience. Thus, while German politicians may seek to distance contemporary defence policy from the past, British politicians have invoked the ‘good war’ against Hitler to explain and justify force in almost every major deployment since 1945: a record including expeditions as diverse as the 1956 Suez invasion, the Falklands War of 1982, the 1991 Gulf War, various Balkan interventions and more recently the 2003 invasion of Iraq. More extreme, neo-conservative ideologues of the US-led War against Terror have invoked Spartan defence of Classical Greece against Persia both as an analogue for current operations and evidence of an enduring need for active military ‘defence’ of the West against oriental enemies (Hanson, 2002; Ricks, 2014). Whatever the richness and diversity of the historic record may suggest, past military encounters apparently provide resources of unmatched potency for essentialising the continuity of identity and the danger of armed Others.

Critical War Studies looking forward: war/truth at (and as) the intersection

Since 9/11, affirmations of a ‘Western Way of War’ supposedly extending uninterrupted across millennia from Classical Greece have been evident in academic and non-academic military histories, popular culture such as the *300* movie franchise as well as soldiers’ graffiti on the walls of Forward Operating Bases in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. These not only suppose the presence of an enduring, implacable, non-Western existential threat, but the equally enduring necessity of Western societies organised around politically privileged, elite military defenders. As a symptomatic turn within war/truth, this indicates the intellectual shock of 9/11 consisted less in revelation of dangerous, external Others than new vulnerabilities to insurgents operating simultaneously from the global periphery and – indistinguishably – inside the West itself (Devji, 2005). The immediate and enduring result was a radicalisation of the security logics of the previous decade. But military power was also reimagined to legitimately pre-empt, punish and deter enemies now regarded as a source of meaningful ideological competition.

Spatial and societal assumptions separating the violently underdeveloped from pacific modernity were undone in other ways. The post-Cold War security imaginary conceptualised military intervention as a mono-directional projection of force by an ‘intervener’ into a ‘target’ state. Now, however, extensive military deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan produced a circuit of mutual constitution, with state–society relations of targets and interveners alike undergoing profound (if unevenly violent) war-driven transformations. This produced novel security knowledges centring on ‘radicalisation’, ‘resilience’ and ‘cohesion’. These domestic(ating) projects, however, could never be made entirely separable from the spectacle of force, as extensive killing and dying in the Middle East – mediated and circulated with unprecedented speed and intensity – necessitated new efforts at truth-work and meaning making.

The nature and extent of warfighting in the opening decades of the 21st century then, foregrounded and affirmed its power of social transformation. Among the least surprised by this are feminist scholars and activists. Arguably the most important contribution to critical scholarship on war of all, the quality of feminist thought reflects a politically heterogeneous tradition, intensity of disagreement over what exactly ‘the war question’ is and how it should be answered (Sylvester, 2005, 2011). Fundamentally for many feminist scholars, patriarchal social and political order is central to what makes war wagable and a marked historical correlation exists between ‘militaristic’ societies and institutionalised sexism (Elshtain, 1995; Reardon, 1996). In one regard, then, gendered order facilitates warfighting to the extent that

the former is presupposed in the strategic knowledges and practices of war-waging powers (Enloe, 1989, 2000). Like other forms of war/truth, however, gender norms are subject to the destabilising effect of changing knowledge economies and the impact of war itself. Thus, military preparation and conduct also requires new, gendered, truth-work. Archetypes of hypermasculinised ‘warriors’ and hyperfeminised ‘beautiful souls’ must be repeatedly reconstructed and re-articulated in the context of social and military transformation (Jeffords, 1989; Elshtain, 1995).

The politics of the war question in feminism follows from recognition that scholarship and activism, whatever its intent, is never entirely external to the strategic circulation and capture of knowledge (Hutchings, 2011; Kronsell and Svedberg, 2011). Partially because of gender equality initiatives, for example, women are being increasingly recruited into combatant roles. Critical knowledges about the constructedness of gender and the military privilege of male bodies are thus, paradoxically, operationalised in new forms of war/truth and military practice. With them emerge new, politically ambiguous and unmistakably war-centered forms of womens’ agency.

Recognising women as agents and beneficiaries of war rather than universal ‘victims’ demands a more nuanced form of analysis by which the generation of such radically different subject positions and experiences can be understood. In this regard, the turn towards intersectionality and thereby, the situation of gender amid wider, crosscutting relations of division, differentiation and uneven privilege is a challenging but extraordinarily important development (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Peterson, 2010; Bose, 2012). Here, the force of war in producing racial, heteronormative and class distinctions becomes increasingly apparent. North Atlantic societies’ progressive attitudes to ‘difference’ after all, have been consistent and central referents for the civilising benefits of military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a powerful means to distinguish the civilised West from enemies constituted through barbaric, pre-modern cultural practices toward gays, women and girls (Richter-Montpetit, 2007; Manchanda, 2015). In ways that can only be intimated here, the importance of intersectional scholarship for Critical War Studies is extraordinary. If ‘war/truth’ names a recurrent, dynamic constellation of power and privilege, then the question arises as to its function as – and at – the intersection of power and privilege as such. Here too perhaps, the potential of war-centred scholarship for those seeking to address the co-constitution of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so on becomes more evident. This is not to claim that politics and society are, always and everywhere, war ‘all the way down’ (cf: Bartelson, 2016). Even accepting these powerful divisions as outcomes of stories we tell about difference, it would be ridiculous to claim all are ‘war stories’, but look how many are.

Conclusion: war and the ethos of critique

As a transformative power, war has little respect for claims about what it is, what will prevent it or what will happen when we wage it: hence the precariousness of war/truth and the endless discursive labour of those asserting an authoritative relation to fighting. Emphasising a generative ontology contests that authority. It provides a basis from which to critique claims made for the utility of force through an account of that which, regardless of intent, it generates. Understanding fighting as the centre of this field permits us to retain a focus on why and how it happens, while provincialising dominant military-political discourses amid a wider sphere of experience and testimony. It falls to critical scholars then, to present and counterpose the authority of lived experience to the narratives and abstractions of war-waging power inside and outside government. In addition to a more inclusive, democratic public

discourse on war, the ambition in doing so is a richer, broader scholarly field of social and political analysis, explanation and debate than is currently the case.

Within this wider field, war generates an extraordinarily potent intersection between those institutions, identities and dividing practices through which power is distributed. It also provides a central referent for the legitimatisation and necessity of that distribution of power once it has occurred. War/truth, in other words, is a feature of ‘peacetime’. It provides the basis on which future processes of militarisation toward war might gain public acceptance. It shapes public truth economies in ways that, in advance, distinguish those with authoritative strategic expertise from more marginalised voices. By foregrounding the dangerous limits to strategic knowledges, it becomes possible to indicate in advance strategists’ culpability for the ‘unforeseen’ and ‘collateral’ outcomes of force. Widening the authoritative field of comment and analysis might further raise the expectations of proof and argument needed for going to war. In this sense a broader, more critical and publically engaged war studies might serve a progressive role now and in future.

In overviewing the animating concerns for Critical War Studies, this chapter positioned them in specific histories of war-driven transformation. Here, Foucault provides a key referent. His work – particularly the *Society must be Defended* lectures – stands as exemplary not only as an analysis of war as a generative organiser of human affairs, but as a self-critical exercise in which its powers are analysed historically, in specific subject positions, but always to some degree from *within* (2003). War is engaged critically from the perspective of those always already implicated in it, without any transcendent position that might exteriorise us. Critical scholarship then, participates in truth economies which are always in part war-driven, just as – as subjects – we carry traces of war in the diverse assemblages of meaning that make us knowable at all. One outcome of such a position is a resistance to easy assumptions about the separateness of pacific, counter-hegemonic academic knowledges from the weaponised truths of policy makers and practitioners. Astute critique is, ideally, a form of informed engagement with the powers of war, not a self-satisfied isolation from them. Limiting the claims made for force as an instrument, to be effective, requires an extensive understanding of that instrument: a better one arguably, than those with formal responsibility for using it.

Note

- 1 See e.g.: Michael Sheehan’s chapter in Baylis, Smith and Owens (2014): a marked improvement on several earlier editions of this standard textbook which lacked a chapter – or even a dedicated index entry – on war.

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